

THE WHITE BATTALION¹

By FRANCES GILCHRIST WOOD

From *The Bookman*

AN orderly ushered two officers of the Foreign Legion, young men in mud-stained khaki, through the door of a dugout back of the fighting line in France. As they entered the hut a French officer in horizon blue, equally muddy, rose and returned the American's salute.

"You will be seated?" He pushed camp chairs toward them.

A guttering candle, stuck in a bottle neck, veiled rather than revealed the sordid interior. The light flickered across the young Frenchman's face, threw gaunt shadows under his eyes emphasized the look of utter weariness and — there was something more.

The senior officer of the Legion, Captain Hailes, looked at him keenly.

"Major Fouquet, we report at headquarters in an hour, sir. Lieutenant Agor, commanding platoon at extreme right — contact platoon with your battalion, sir, reports we lost touch with the French forces between the advance and the first trench. Thought it might have been his watch, but the timepiece checks up to a second."

The captain hesitated uneasily, "We are not presuming to question, sir, but Lieutenant Agor says he saw — we felt there might have been some cause, some reason that did not appear, so we came —"

The Frenchman lifted his head in a stupid way altogether foreign to his usual manner.

"Merci, Captain Hailes. We were — forty seconds slow in attacking the first trench, sir." He went on mechanically as if delivering a rehearsed report. "Caught

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up and reached the second trench on time. Few prisoners besides the children. Enemy practically wiped out."

He concluded heavily, a dazed look blotting all expression.

"There was a cause for the forty seconds delay, Major?"

Fouquet struggled up out of the curious apathy. He cleared his throat, made several attempts to speak and finally blurted out.

"You won't believe it—I saw it and I cannot! But there are the children—and a first-line trench full of dead Huns—without a mark on them! Barres was flying over us—he saw the Battalion—knew them for old comrades. The women—all of them saw the faces of their dead! I don't believe it, sir,—but how did we do it? The women never thrust once in the first trench—the children haven't a wound—that's got to prove it!"

He stopped abruptly—looking from one to the other with a gesture of hopeless protest. The Americans regarded him with puzzled eyes.

"Was it some new trick of the Huns? God knows they've given them to us in plenty! Can you tell us—it might—?"

Fouquet pulled himself forward, his knuckles whitening with his grip of the table edge.

"You know the history of the section of the Front the Avengers retook to-day?"

"No, Major Fouquet. We came in later, with the Canadians."

"It began with the great retreat of 1914, sir, when the Germans were driving us back toward Paris. They had crowded our army against the river. Between the slow crossing and their terrible artillery fire, new to us then, we faced annihilation!"

There was a rustle at the door of the dugout and a whispered password. Fouquet did not pause.

"To the —nth Battalion was given the honor of acting as rear guard. Ah, sir,—" his voice steadied—guttural with pride and emotion, "our men stood like a barricade of rock against which the waves of German infantry dashed themselves, only to break and be with-

drawn for re-formation. Each receding wave showed where it had bit into the red and blue barrier, for we were wearing the old uniform then, but the bits slid together, closing up the gaps to stand against the next flood. When the eroded wall went down, undermined and overwhelmed at last, the main army of France was across the river and safe.

"Only two of us lived to rejoin our army, Lieutenant Barres and myself. Barres's leg was shattered, hopelessly crippling him for the infantry, but when the wounds healed — France could not spare so brave a man, so they strapped him to the seat of a plane in the winged section of the army, where he is still fighting!"

The sharp click, click of crutches tapped across the floor as Barres of the Aviation Squad came into the fringe of light. He saluted, then broke in upon Fouquet's story.

"But you do not tell them, *mon camarade*, but for you I would have died with the rest! He does not tell you, sir, that he put his own chance of escape into peril by dragging me — a helpless burden — with him!"

He looked at Fouquet with an anxious frown, "I thought there might be enquiry about to-day. You are —?"

A look flashed between them, the love of men who have faced death together.

"Yes, Barres, I shall need you. It is the history of the Avengers I am telling — to explain —"

He turned to the Americans.

"In the years of struggle that came after the retreat, our women of France have taken the places of men behind the lines, while our soldiers held the Front. But when Russia freed herself the news filtered through the provinces that the women of Russia when the revolution needed them formed themselves into the Battalion of Death. We also heard that German women were in the army.

"Then the flame of a common inspiration touched the widows of the —nth. They sought and found each other and petitioned as their right that they be entered and drilled as the —nth Battalion of Avengers.

"Military objections refused them again and again,

but the women stood as firm in their purpose as their men who had held the post of rear guard. Always they asked, Why should France be left a nation of sorrowful women only? Let the widowed women of the —nth take the place of men in the chance of death—they would welcome it—and so save men to France.

“At last they were accepted and trained. Each added to her equipment a small packet of cyanide of potassium as her Russian sisters had taught her. One further request they made, that the position assigned to them might be in the course of the advance to retake the ground held to the death by their men. To me was given the great honor to be their commander.”

He drew himself up with pride. “They have justified their petition for enlistment, sir, they wear the strap of a battalion commended for bravery. We have been fully trusted to hold our share of the Front in safety.”

As if at the significance of his own words his head dropped, then lifted again grimly.

“It was for to-day’s work that this battalion was assembled and trained to invincibility. We need no one to interpret the meaning of the Front to us, but to the women—to retake this strip of ground sodden with the blood of the rear guard barricade built of their men, meant being given the denied rite of closing glazed eyes, the crossing of arms on rigid breasts, the lighting of candles at head and feet and the last kiss on frozen lips. They were mad for it—not in revenge but to right a wrong.”

Fouquet’s voice thrilled, “That is the history, sir, and the temper of the Battalion of Avengers who held the trench at your right!

“When the order came for attack to-day, they waited, taut as arrows in held bowstrings, at the foot of the ladders for the signal to go over the top. Like shafts released they sprang up the sides of the ditch. There was sure death to the Hun in every gripped bayonet as they bent to follow the barrage of fire across the craters and snarled wire of No Man’s Land.

“No human sound comes through the hell of battle artillery and yet we knew the strangling gasp that ran

the length of the line as the protective barrage made its final jump, lifted and showed us the trench we were to take. The women stood as motionless as the corpses of the old —nth!

"Thrust shield-wise above the heads of the Huns, crowning the ditch as with protective spikes, frightened and sobbing, cowering before us were hundreds of little children!"

Fouquet's chair went spinning back as he leaned across the table.

"God! men — they knew! The devil tells them! They knew this section was held by women! For us to hold the Front — our share of the Front — these mothers must bayonet their way through crying, helpless babies!"

His groan found gasping echo.

"They were children of the French villages held by the Germans — we could tell! Some of them had been shot by the last of our barrage fire after the Huns had shoved them over the top. It was hell to see the children's torn bodies writhing — we're used to it with men! The smallest — babies — were clinging to the older ones — children of five or six — trying to hide — between the Huns and — us!

"If we went on — took the ditch — these mothers must cut through a barricade of children! If we did not go on, we betrayed our trust, lost our share of the Front — let the Huns behind the lines through a gap made by the failure of the women of the —nth!

"We seemed to stand there for hours, but it was only a second. The Huns had thrust their guns between the children, and were holding their fire — the devilish cat and mouse game!

"Then one of the women captains stumbled forward and made the sign of the cross. It is the voiceless battle cry of the Avengers and signs supreme sacrifice for all the Front means. She lifted her right hand in the sweep of victory — on her wrist was bound the packet of death they carry in case of capture by the kultur beasts — and fell, for the Huns opened fire the instant they saw her gesture.

"But the message had gotten over! They could charge

— they must — and the cyanide would erase the intolerable memory forever! I looked at those nearest and saw they would go through with it, but men — their faces were set with the look of the face of Christ on the cross!”

He stopped, breathing heavily, and looked from one American to the other.

“You won’t believe it — I saw it and I cannot — but the proof is there! As the women gripped to thrust, leaning forward as if to force rebellious bodies toward that barricade, there swept down upon us from the rear or above, a sudden striding mist — a battalion of marching shadows in a blur of the old red and blue that outstripped the Avengers’ advance. There was a flash of charging steel and the waving colors of the old — nth as they swept over the untouched children into the trench.

“It’s all a blur, sir, I can’t tell you clearly, but they turned their faces as they passed and — we knew our dead. You could see the women cry out and lift their arms, each to her own man as he halted an instant beside her.

“Madame Arouet was sobbing as if caught by a bullet, ‘Jean — Jean! — to have seen you again! Ah, my God!’ The tall corporal, just beyond, threw herself with high piercing scream — arms outstretched — toward the smiling shadow that was passing.

“The bravest man in the old — nth, where all were brave, dropped behind as he bent over the fallen captain. There was a quivering smile of recognition just as the jerking heap settled into quiet; then, as if he waited for it, a slender blur in horizon blue sprang to his side and swept forward with the Battalion — though the captain still lay where she had fallen!”

Fouquet gripped his comrade, arm and crutch together, with a cry,

“Did you see our brave captain salute as he passed? Joyously I shouted as I fell into step beside him, but — I dropped back — I could not keep that pace! Barres — Barres — you saw them? You must have seen them? It was the old — nth come back to save their women from the last hellish trap set by fiends! We know they had the right. This was their battleground where once before they had saved an army of France!”

Lieutenant Agor was leaning across the table with staring eyes: "Then — that was what I — saw, sir?" He turned to his commander, "I told you it was like the fog blowing in off Frisco bay, and —"

Captain Hailes half rose, "My lieutenant said he lost you when a mist obscured the contact platoon. He said he saw — I — thought it was shell shock — I meant to send him behind the lines —"

Barres shook his head slowly as he caught Fouquet about the shoulder.

"Mon ami — I saw — I know! Very low I flew over the gap to-day when it broke and widened. I felt the White Battalion first, rushing through the planes — then I saw them — a mist of the old red and blue with wondrous swords!" His voice sank low, "From above I saw one who led them — a shining one who, even as we have read, smote the camp of the Assyrians.

"It was the old —nth that followed. I knew them!" His voice caught. "Did you see the rascals in the third squad goose-stepping as they closed in on the Hun?" With a break of unsteady laughter, "It was always their final joke with the German, sir, before they got him. No one could break them of it! Fouquet — we know! It was the old —nth, our White Battalion!"

"A White Battalion!" Agor repeated the words slowly, still staring.

The aviator shifted his crutch and drew himself erect. "*Mes amis*, the Huns fling the taunt that France has been bled white! To us it means a White Army — a crowding host killed in battle — the red life of gallant youth given so gloriously that it cannot die!

"And France bled white . . .! We know," the words halted, "the country for which we went to war is maimed — scarred — she can never again be the same France, but —" his lifted face gleamed through the dim light, "our battle cry has changed! We no longer fight '*Pour la Patrie!*' but '*Pour le Droit!*' — the right that is greater than country!"

With a sharp intake of breath he turned to his comrade. Fouquet's protesting look was gone. With the sure touch of reality he picked up the story.

"It was all over in a breath, sir — like a mist swirling along the trenches shot through with phantom steel, and we knew our work was being done. When it lifted — the ditch lay motionless!

"The women had dropped on their knees with their arms about the children. We passed the poor little ones through to the rear in charge of the wounded.

"The first trench was piled with dead — unmarked dead! The communicating tunnels were cleared or quiet; that was how we made up the forty seconds and followed the barrage on time to the second ditch.

"I looked down the line as we made ready for the second charge. Not a Hun cried 'Kamarad!' or tried to surrender when they saw the faces of the Avengers. The second ditch was piled with nearly as many dead as the first — marked dead! The Avengers and the White Battalion had retaken the ground for which the —nth had given their lives.

"That is all, sir," the gaunt figure in mud-stained blue straightened, "excepting that the fouling Beast is going in the end — we know! He cannot stand against the unconquerable dead. And when we march through Berlin, the White Armies will march at the head of the column —" he lifted his hand in salute, "*Pour le Droit!*"

The crippled aviator balanced on crutches as he brought up his hand,

"*Pour le Droit!*"

Noiselessly the men of the Foreign Legion pushed back their chairs and stood at salute. Silently they faced each other in a long moment of understanding. The major in blue dropped his arm and with smiling eyes gripped the hand of the man in khaki.

He flung open the door of the dugout, humming the Song of France in marching time. The young officers, French and American, fell into step together,

"Gentlemen — to Headquarters!"

The lilting voices filled the low room to the accent of marching feet,

*"Allons, enfants de la patrie,
Le jour de gloire est arrivé!"*